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AUTHOR Boynton, Michaela R.
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ABSTRACT

Suggestions for publicizing unique qualities and successes of rural and small schools use existing communication channels to emphasize positive attributes and help change the negative. Tips include: tell students, parents, and community about school goals, highlight student and staff achievement, reiterate the school's responsibility to the community, alert all to student needs, and listen as the public communicates to the school. Know and understand community attitudes, encourage community awareness of what happens and why, locate key communicators in the community and see that they get the right information early. Open school buildings to public use and use the facilities to communicate via showcases and bulletin boards. Encourage parent participation, spread positive information at school board meetings, make all printed information clear, concise, and pertinent, and disseminate it widely. (LFL)

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Practical P.R. Techniques for Small Schools

Michaela R. Boynton, School Information/Publications Coordinator
Bellingham Public Schools

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As individuals involved in schools today we need to constantly remind ourselves that we are delivering public education -- and doing a good job of it -- and we need to remind other people of that, too.

We are one of the few nations which provides public education to all our children. For 180 days each year parents give the schools their most valued possessions--their children and their money. They expect the schools to use the one to prepare the other for life in an increasingly complex and demanding society. The schools are obligated to let parents know what is being done with their children and their money.

Those in rural special education are a very special group of people in today's education. They are involved in the teaching and training of students whose progress is measured by a different timetable. In addition, this teaching is being done in small and often isolated communities.

These are both situations which provide a great many frustrations and a great many satisfactions.

Small districts have many unique qualities and we should be aware of those qualities and capitalize on them.

It is easy to concern ourselves with the disadvantages of smallness and to forget the advantages. There are things a small district can offer that no large one can.

Small districts can provides more individual attention.

Staff and administrators are able to spend more time together cooperatively -- indeed, often the administrator is also teaching part or all of the day.

Many of the youngsters are second and third generation students in a district.

There is in-depth community contact.

There is high student involvement in all activities.

There is little other organization competition for the time and attention of the community.

One can get an answer quickly -- yes, no, or "not this year."

Talented students can be pushed for scholarships. It may take a year or two but it can be done.

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There are fewer committee meetings.

Teachers and others probably have fewer discipline problems. School people not only know almost everything about the students, they also know almost everything about the families from which they come. They probably know more than they care to.

They know the members of the school board well.

They get direct communication from them.

There probably is a lower student teacher ratio.

There is certainly lots of parent participation.

It is not a nine to three job.

I first began teaching in a school district where there was no incorporated town, no bank, no local law enforcement, no service clubs, no motels. There was no doctor, no dentist, no lawyer, and no drug store in the community. The only people who had attended college were the school superintendent, the teachers -- some of whom did not live in the district -- and three of the people employed by the State Department of Natural Resources. Our five buses each drove over 180 miles each day.

But this school district had a remarkable and positive communication program. Graduates went to Cornell, Yale, and Stanford. The district had a National Science Teacher of the Year. The high school newspaper was rated All-America. The 100-member marching band wore uniforms paid for through a series of Friday night smorgasbords. The school was the center of the community and had a remarkable -- and positive -- public communication program.

Every school district has a communication program -- good or bad. It's in place right now. Every school system, regardless of size, has a system of x number of staff members, z number of faculty members, and y number of students. All these individuals communicate daily between the school and the community and the community and the school. Special education is part of this.

This communication program may be in the form of a school bus passing a taxpayer on the road, a teacher going out of the way to help a student, a custodian telling the storekeeper how the district wastes floor wax and other supplies. It may be a combination of positive and negative, structured and random activity, but it is there all the time. The challenge is harnessing this available reservoir to emphasize and build the positive and to help change the negatives.

How do you do it? You plan. And the plan must be systematic and <u>two-way</u> and should tell students, parents, and the community about the goals of the school. It should spotlight student and staff achievement. It should reiterate the feeling that the school is responsible to the immediate community which it serves. It should alert all concerned about the needs of the students. The communication plan doesn't have to be complicated. A

decision on who needs to know it, when, how, and why is vital. And the District must listen as the public communicates to the schools.

In the first act of Meredith Wilson's play Music Man there is a scene on a train. The car is filled with salesmen talking about the secret of being successful in any town. There is a phrase which is repeated many times - "You gotta know the territory." That is true in the education business, too. You gotta know the territory. Individuals must understand and know the community and the factors which make it what it is. There must be understanding of the attitudes of the people who make the community function, whatever the size of that community.

Awareness must be nutured and encouraged. A lot or research and time has gone into finding out that parents want to know how well their child is learning and what that child is learning. Parents also want to know how the child is being taught, if the teacher is good, and how much does it all cost?

Non-parents-and this is 7 out of 10 individuals today-want to know how much school costs, what is taught, and how it is taught.

Those directly involved with the schools -- teachers, cooks, principals, custodians, secretaries -- all need to know what is happening and why it is happening. When there is a need for change, all the employees should share this information-and the rationale-in a group together. These are the people who see and talk with everyone, and who get asked questions. They need to know the answers.

National surveys tell us that the individual who has the most credibility in any school district, large or small, and to whom people listen, is the custodian. The public is convinced the custodian really knows what's going on -- "after all, he works there." The school bus driver and the school secretary are tied for second. The superintendent ranks last on the list with the teachers and the principal in between.

Everyone must become communication conscious. However, remember that everything that happens is not picture perfect. Some things may not provide points of pride, but bad news is also part of communication. If a school district does not recognize difficulties and point out what is being done to improve or change, then the community will provide its own answers. These will not necessarily be accurate. The rumors will fly and the situation only gets worse.

In all communities there are key communicators. To "know the territory" is to know who these key communicators are.

A long time ago, before dialing systems and microchips, I wanted to contact a friend who lived in a small town. I called the long distance operator and gave her the name and address of my friend telling the operator I did not have a telephone number. She gave me the phone number and then added "But Donna's not home right now -- she's over at her mother's house doing the laundry -- do you want me to ring over there?" Now there was a key communicator for that town.

Who occupies this spot in your community? Is the key communicator the postmaster, the grocery store operator, the tavern keeper, the barber, the chairman of a church group, the minister, the operator of the local coffee house, the PTA president? Or all of them?

If so, these are the people who must get the right information and get it early. These key people can stop or start rumors; can reassure; explain; pressure; circulate news about great things; or permit a testing of waters for change. They can be tremendous help and are willing to help.

In small communities the school is usually the hub of activities. The buildings have continual use. They are places for programs, meetings, lectures, public hearings, and they should be open and available for public use. The public owns them.

These meetings in the schools are also good places to communicate. Showcases can display achievements, art works, textbooks, posters with scores, or photos. It can all be shown.

School board meetings are good places to spread positive information. They are more than business sessions. Students can be recognized, teams congratulated, music enjoyed, readings given. School board meetings, in many areas, are both business and social occasions. The members are people in the community that everyone knows. Let them tell all the great things. Be sure they have the information.

Awareness of the positive must be encouraged, generated, and praised. Attitudes about school and about education are formed early and firmly for good or bad in classrooms, school offices, and halls. These attitudes last a lifetime.

Those who are successful in school believe education is worthwhile and in turn encourage their children to believe in it. Those who are less successful or who had negative experiences do not encourage their children in education. People have purely emotional responses to schools, logically or not, and they are based on the individual's own school experience or the experience of someone close to that individual.

The make-up of small communities has changed a great deal with the desire of many for a "country" atmosphere and a change in life style -- a wish not to be urban-centered. These people are not country people and because of this they reflect a change in attitude and philosophy and expectation. They may be part of your community make-up - a part of the territory. They have chosen to educate their children in this "country" atmosphere and they have their own set of expectations about the schools. Parents are no longer blindly accepting of what the school may or may not be able to do. However, parent support and understanding is in direct ratio to the amount of time spent in the schools. Parents are great helpers and should be encouraged to participate. Only by becoming familiar with the school operation can they begin to understand the rationale behind some of the practices.

Most small communities do not have a newspaper, radio or television station. Much of the printed information is generated and distributed through the school letter or the superintendent's letter or a note from the teacher. All these need to be clear and concise and as full of pertinent information as possible. They also need to be posted at the grocery store, the post office, if permitted, and in the local coffee house. If you want to be certain the letter gets home -- mail it. The certainty of printed material getting home when given to students is disturbingly low.

To be understood in letters home, forget all the professional phrases. Avoid educational jargon like the plague! If an event is important or a message is important, fancy words won't make it more so. This is the age of the 15 and 30 second radio commercial, and the 15 and 30 second television commercial. Tell the folks a lot -- but in short sentences. Be certain that third paragraph is really necessary in order to explain when and where a meeting is going to be held and what is going to be discussed.

Do not ignore the major media even though it may not be located in your immediate area. A good story is a good story, and if it is celebrating unique qualities, or solving a unique problem, package it up and tell CBS about it or tell the nearest local newspaper. Invite them to come visit and see.

In Eastern Washington there is a high school with a total of 185 students in the four classes. But this school has 8,045 different courses to offer the three upper grades. Eight thousand of them are correspondence courses. Among the many choices are German, Italian, electronics, computer programming, motorcycle mechanics. The school district pays for them, and provides a 'correspondence classroom' with a teacher to give all the help she can for two periods in the regular class day. Students regularly are admitted to colleges and universities, and some have earned scholarships on the strength of these correspondence courses! This is solving a problem in an unusual but highly productive way. This is something for the major media.

Your communication program can work but you have to help it along. The bus drivers, cooks, custodians, secretaries, teachers, parents should be reminded of all the good things going on. Tell each other -- and everyone else for miles around -- what is being done right, how it's being done, what the school plans to do about the things that aren't right. Tell everyone how valuable all the people are in accomplishing these good things. Celebrate your unique qualities. You do not have indifferent communities. You offer very special attitudes and achieve very special things. Share them.